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ABSTRACT

The notion that rhetoric (and to a lesser extent, argument) is epistemic is an increasingly popular one today, although it can be traced to ancient Greece. The notion holds that rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, creates and shapes knowledge. Two ancient authors--Aristophanes and Plato--provide evidence that others had notions of rhetoric as epistemic. Passages in Aristophanes's "The Clouds" suggest that through speech one may alter perceptions of the world. In the "Gorgias," Plato has Gorgias establish the claim that rhetoric is capable of producing belief regardless of the actual state of affairs. Clearly, both Aristophanes and Plato report the existence of a notion of rhetoric as epistemic. Aristophanes openly satirizes it, while Plato purports to engage adherents of this view in philosophical debate. For the sophist, Protagoras, knowledge was subjective and consisted only of appearances. He further argued that rhetoric was capable of making the weaker argument appear stronger. Gorgias's surviving writings provide an explanation for the claim that one cannot know reality or communicate it. Persuasion is able to function because human beings lack memory of the past, awareness of the present, and foreknowledge of the future. Isocrates also recognized one's inability to foretell the future. He declared that rhetoric made the great seem small and the lowly seem grand. Thus, the ancients did have a conception of rhetoric as epistemic. (HOD)

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"NOTIONS OF 'RHETORIC AS EPISTEMIC' IN ANCIENT GREECE"

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"Notions of 'Rhetoric as Epistemic' in Ancient Greece"

The notion that rhetoric--and to a lesser extent, argument--is epistemic--is an increasingly popular one today.[1] Some question exists, however, concerning just how novel this notion is. Of course the ancients, living in Greek society several centuries before the birth of Christ, do not develop this notion in precisely the same fashion as twentieth-century American scholars. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the notion that it can be traced to ancient Greece. This essay will briefly indicate what is meant by "rhetoric is epistemic" before developing this argument.

What Does "Rhetoric is Epistemic" Mean?

Examination of the sources listed in the first note to this essay reveals some difference of opinion on this question. It is not the purpose of this essay to review those diverse conceptions or to select and advocate one, but it should be observed that what is sketched herein is a view of rhetoric as epistemic, not the view. Simply put, rhetoric--the art of persuasion--can create and shape knowledge. "Knowledge" is used here to include various cognitions, including beliefs or opinions concerning the nature, function, or value of objects and ideas as well as courses of action. This notion relies upon two specific assumptions: 1. (at least some) knowledge can not be obtained through direct observation, and 2. such knowledge must be procured (or conveyed or justified) through rhetoric.

To illustrate this notion, consider the phenomenon of nuclear fission. Although the fact that an H-bomb can destroy a city, or that a nuclear power plant can generate electricity, is difficult to deny,

other, and arguably more important, ideas are subject to the manipulations of persuasive discourse. For example, consider these questions:

Is nuclear electrical power worth the risks it entails?

How should nuclear wastes be stored?

How many nuclear weapons does the United States need?

Can the human race survive a nuclear exchange?

If the U.S. has effective satellite defenses against Soviet ICBM's, are we likely to attempt a pre-emptive first strike?

The answers to these sorts of questions constitute the knowledge that we must have to make intelligent decisions about nuclear energy, but it is of course utterly impossible to "observe" the objective answer to any of them. Even the "scientific" theories which are designed to explain, predict, and control these forces are accepted and rejected on the basis of argument and persuasion, as contemporary philosophers of science recognize.[2] Thus, many of the most important beliefs we have about the world and how we ought to behave within it are rhetorically generated and altered. Now we can turn to the question, did the ancients have a conception of rhetoric which resembles this one?

The Ancients and Rhetoric as Epistemic

This section argues that the ancients clearly had a notion of rhetoric as epistemic, which is similar to the one just outlined. Initially, let me make clear what is not being argued here. This essay does not attempt to argue that there was a univocal conception of rhetoric as epistemic in ancient Greece, or that all of the Greek philosophers and rhetoricians adhered to a general notion that rhetoric is epistemic, or that those who did subscribe to this notion

had equally well-developed views on this question. However, there is no question that a notion of rhetoric as epistemic existed, was fairly widespread, and, in the hands of some writers, was fairly sophisticated. Two tacks will be taken to support the claim advanced here. First, and more briefly, sources will be examined who report that this notion existed (even though they may not have adhered to it themselves), and then writers who actually embrace this notion will be explicated in greater detail.

Secondary Evidence

Two ancient authors--Aristophanes, the comic poet, and Plato, the idealistic philosopher--provide evidence that others had notions of rhetoric as epistemic. In his play The Clouds, Aristophanes has Strepsiades exclaim that some profess that "they'll teach (only they'll want some money) How one may speak and conquer, right or wrong."[3] Desiring to escape certain debts, and believing himself too old to benefit from this training, he later asks that his son Phedippides be taught how to make the worse cause appear the better:

> So now, I prithee, teach him both your Logics,
> The Better, as you call it, and the Worse
> Which with the worse cause can defeat the Better;
> Or it not both, at all events the Worse.[4]

Strepsiades presumably comes to regret this course of action when, after learning how to make the worse cause appear the better, Phedippides beats his father and then justifies this action through rhetoric. The point is that these passages suggest that through speech, one may alter perceptions of the world ("make the worse cause

appear the better"). Thus, the comic poets recognized the notion that one can make conflicting arguments on every topic. In the Gorgias, Plato has Gorgias establish the claim that rhetoric is capable of producing belief regardless of the actual state of affairs.

> Socr. Then it is perfectly clear that knowledge and belief are not the same.
>
> Gorg. True.
>
> Socr. Still, those who have learned have been persuaded just as much as those who believe.
>
> Gorg. That is so.
>
> Socr. Then which kind of persuasion concerning justice and injustice does rhetoric effect in law courts and other public gatherings?
>
> Gorg. It would seem quite obvious, Socrates, that it is the kind which produces mere belief.[5]

So, rhetoric can produce belief without knowledge on the part of the persuader. In the Phaedrus, Plato argues that the Sophists claim to use rhetoric to alter perceptions: "he who possesses the art of doing this can make the same thing appear to the same people now just, now unjust, at will. . . in public harangues, no doubt, he can make the same thing seem to the same people now good, and now the reverse of good."[6] And later he declares that this power can be exercised regardless of the true state of affairs: "Tisias and Gorgias. . . realized that probability deserves more respect than truth, who could make trifles seem important and important points trifles by the force of their language, who dressed up novelties as antiques and vice

versa."[7] Thus, rhetoric can alter appearances, can create contradictory perceptions of something before a single audience, all independent of actual knowledge. Clearly, both Aristophanes and Plato report the existence of a notion of rhetoric as epistemic, although neither accepts it. Aristophanes openly satirizes it, while Plato purports to engage adherents of this view in philosophical debate. Neither author is attempting to present the views of the sophists in an exhaustive and objective fashion, but they supply strong evidence of the existence of this notion.

Direct Evidence

Unfortunately, little of what the sophists wrote survives directly today (and since they relied heavily on oral instruction, probably many of their ideas were never committed to papyrus). Most of what we know of them must be gleaned from secondary authors who quote (or paraphrase) their words. This is true of Protagoras, the oldest sophist. However, because he does have a fairly well-developed notion of rhetoric as epistemic, his views will be considered next.

One of Protagoras's most famous sayings is "Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not."[8] This suggests that there is no objective truth or understanding of the nature of things external to and readily available to human beings, that we can only possess subjective knowledge. According to Plato, "As Protagoras meant when he said of all things the measure is man, that as things appear to me, then, so they actually are for me, and as they appear to you, so they actually are for you."[9] Thus, knowledge for Protagoras is subjective and consists only of appearances.

He further argued that rhetoric was capable of "making the weaker argument appear stronger."[10] Thus, our knowledge is determined by our perceptions, not simply or solely by any objective external reality, and rhetoric is able to influence those perceptions even to the point of making weaker arguments seem to be stronger. He also declares that rhetoric is capable of making opposing arguments on any topic,[11] which is why is is considered to be the "father of debate."[12] Thus, we have in brief a complete notion of rhetoric as epistemic. Absolute or objective knowledge is not available to us, so we must rely upon appearances. Rhetoric is able to make the weaker cause appear the better, and is capable of doing so on any topic.

Probably the most sophisticated view of rhetoric as epistemic was developed by Gorgias. The works by Gronbeck, Engnell, and Enos may profitably be consulted here.[13] The three theses of Gorgias' work On Nature present his view of our ability to comprehend and communicate reality: Nothing exists; If it exists, we cannot comprehend it; If we could comprehend it, we could not communicate it.[14] The second thesis supports the first assumption of a notion of rhetoric as epistemic, declaring that we cannot apprehend (know) reality. However, it is the last assertion which concerns us the most. Let us begin with Gorgias' explanation of it:

> But even it it should be apprehended, it would be impossible of being conveyed to another. . . . For that by which we reveal is logos, but logos is not substances and existing things. Therefore we do not reveal existing things to our neighbors, but logos, which is something other than substances.[15]

Kerferd comments on this passage, suggesting that:

> This is so because the means by which we communicate is speech or logos, and this logos is not and can never be the externally subsiding objects that actually are. What we communicate to our neighbours is never the actual things, but only a logos which is always other than the things themselves.[16]

In other words, as the general semanticists were to put it centuries hence, the word is not the thing. We cannot communicate reality because we communicate with words, and words are not the reality about which we seek to converse. Thus, Gorgias' surviving writings provide an explanation for the claim that we cannot know reality or communicate it. The claim that we cannot communicate the truth through words also appears in his Defense of Palamedes, where he declares that "If then, by means of words, it were possible for the truth of actions to become free of doubt <and> clear to hearers, judgment would now be easy from what has been said. But. . . this is not the case."[17]

Gorgias does not stop here, but continues on to explain how we do create belief and opinion. In the Helen, he explains that:

> To understand that persuasion, when added to speech, is wont also to impress the soul as it wishes, one must study. . . the words of astronomers who, substituting opinion for opinion, taking away one but creating another, makes what is incredible and unclear seem true to the eyes of opinion.[18]

How is it that we can substitute one opinion for another, making what once was incredible now seem true? Persuasion is able to function because human beings lack memory of the past, awareness of the present, and foreknowledge of the future.

> All who have and do persuade people of things do so by molding a false argument. For if all men on all subjects had <both> memory of things past and <awareness> of things present and foreknowledge of the future, speech would not be similarly similar, since as things are now it is not easy for them to recall the past not to consider the present nor to predict the future. So that on most subjects most men take opinion as counselor to their soul, but since opinion is slippery and insecure it costs those employing it into slippery and insecure successes.[19]

Thus, human beings rely on opinion, which is easy to change by persuasion, because they do not have an adequate memory of previous events, are insufficiently aware of present events, and cannot know future events. It is the lack of knowledge about reality which he accounts for in On Nature which permits rhetoric to alter appearances.

The last ancient to be examined here is Isocrates. He too recognizes that we cannot fortell the future:

> it is manifest to all that foreknowledge of future events is not vouchsafed to our human nature, but that we are so far removed from this prescience that Homer, who has been conceded the highest reputation for wisdom, has pictured even the gods at times debating among themselves about the

future--not that he knew their minds bent but that that he desired to show us that for mankind this power lies on the realms of the impossible.[20]

Given the lack of definite knowledge, we must of necessity turn to rhetoric: "With this faculty we both contend with others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown."[21] Hence, it is not surprising to discover Isocrates' statement that eloquence can "represent the great as lowly and invest the little with grandeur."[22] While his views do not survive in a form as well-developed as those of Gorgias, nevertheless it is clear that Isocrates' conception of rhetoric had much in common with the notion that rhetoric is epistemic sketched earlier.

Conclusion

Let us return to the assumptions about "rhetoric as epistemic" which were sketched earlier. The first one, that (at least some) knowledge is not obtainable through simple observation, is articulated by Protagoras ("man is the measure of all things") and Gorgias ("if anything exists, man could not apprehend it"). Isocrates agrees, as least insofar as knowledge of what should be done in the future. The second assumption is that knowledge of such things can be conveyed or justified by rhetoric. Protagoras declares that rhetoric can make the worse cause appear the better. Gorgias declares that we must rely upon doxa, and that rhetoric influences it. Isocrates declares that rhetoric can make the great seem small and the lowly seem grand. Thus, the ancients did have a conception of rhetoric as epistemic.

1

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[4] Ibid, p. 186.

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[7] Ibid, 267A.

[8] Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Schoolmasters," vii.60, tr. W. J. O'Brien, in The Older Sophists, ed. R. K. Sprague (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972, p. 18. See also Plato, Theatetus, 151E, or Diogenes Laertius, IX 51.

[9] Plato, Cratylus, 385E, tr. O'Brien, in The Older Sophists, p. 10.

[10] Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1402123, tr. O'Brien, in The Older Sophists, p. 13.

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[12] See, e.g., Bromley Smith, "The Father of Debate: Protagoras of Abdera," Quarterly Journal of Speech Education 4 (1918): 196-215.

[13] Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Gorgias on Rhetoric and Poetic: A Rehabilitation," Southern Speech Communication Journal 38 (1972): 27-38; Richard Engnell, "Implications for Communication of the Rhetorical Epistemology of Gorgias of Leontini," Western Speech 38 (1973): 175-84; Richard Leo Enos, "The Epistemology of Gorgias' Rhetoric: A Re-Examination," Southern Speech Communication Journal 42 (1976): 35-51.

[14] See Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Schoolmasters, vii.65, in The Older Sophists, p. 42-46.

[15] Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Schoolmasters, vii.83, tr. G. Kennedy, in The Older Sophists, p. 46.

[16] G. B. Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 80.

[17] Gorgias, "A Defense on Behalf of Palamedes by the Same Author," 35, tr. G. Kennedy, The Older Sophists, p. 62.

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[19] Ibid, 11, p. 52.

[20] Isocrates, "Against the Sophists," tr. G. Norlin Isocrates, vol. 2, 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1929), pp. 163-65.

[21] Isocrates, "To Nicocles," tr. G. Norlin, Isocrates, vol. 1, 8, p. 81. See also, "Antidosis," 256.

22
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